

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 25, 2013

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## Hard Work, New Approaches at DHHS Reduce Number of State Wards

**Lincoln** – The number of state wards in Nebraska is declining, and other trends also show positive progress in addressing the needs of children and families in the child welfare system, said Thomas Pristow, director of Children and Family Services in the Department of Health and Human Services.

On July 22, there were 837 fewer state wards in the child welfare system than in March 2012. That's a 13.6 percent decrease. The number of wards in the state stood at 6,121 in March 2012, and 5,284 on July 15, he said.

"We take great satisfaction in our progress, but we also recognize there are a child and family behind every number," Pristow said. "It is tremendously rewarding to see those numbers drop because it means we're providing the services that will help them address their needs. When there are strong family ties, children are safer and our state is stronger."

In addition, the number of children in out-of-home care fell to 3,680, or 9.4 per thousand at the end of March, he said. The state's rate in 2011 was 10.2 per thousand with 4,336 out of home, when only the District of Columbia's rate was higher in the U.S.

The highest number of wards was 7,803 in April 2006, and the number of state wards fell below the 6,000 mark in August 2012, he said.

"We're reducing the number of wards safely," Pristow said. "In December 2012, we had 12.5 percent of wards re-entering the system less than 12 months after reunification with their family. At the end of May, re-entries were down to 10.9 percent, just 1 percentage point above the federal goal."

"The leaders in our five service areas have worked very hard implementing a new philosophy and approaches to serving children and families," Pristow said. "Research shows that services for children are more effective when provided at home. Employees are focused on providing services to help improve the situations facing families, and they are doing their best to keep children safe."

For example, he said, in 2011 less than half the state wards in out-of-home care received a monthly face-to-face meeting with a case worker. In May, case workers in each of DHHS' five service areas visited about 98 percent of wards. This exceeded the federal requirement of 90 percent of wards, as well as the department's requirement of 95 percent. In 2015, the federal requirement will increase its monthly visitation requirement to 95 percent.

In May, case workers also held quarterly meetings with 86.4 percent of family teams, which includes CFS staff, agencies providing services, families and others involved with the state ward, Pristow said. Six months earlier, family meetings were held 81.2 percent of the time.

Case worker visits with children who were not involved in the court system reached 94.6 percent in May, he said. This was up from 90.2 percent six months earlier. These include, for instance, youth who runaway or are truant from school.

Following a 2008 federal review, which measured compliance with 23 federal child welfare requirements, CFS was given five years to complete a performance improvement plan. CFS recently completed the last requirement, he said, which was a major achievement. The final hurdle required CFS to be more timely in completing safety and risk assessments of children.

"The improvements in these measures show that case workers and employees on the frontlines are doing their very best to help children and families," Pristow said. "Thanks, too, are due to the strong leadership in the local service areas and by division staff in Lincoln. They are focused on safely returning children home or achieving permanent placement through adoption, guardianship or independent living."

Other factors affecting the decrease in state wards include the statewide implementation of Structured Decision Making one year ago, he said. SDM is an evidence-based case management model that provides structure to safety and risk assessments and helps direct resources to families who need them most.

Last fall, Continuous Quality Improvement was initiated by the CFS Protection and Safety Unit. It uses data to improve case management performance leading to improved outcomes for children and their families, Pristow said. Staff from all levels in Protection and Safety is involved, which keeps them aware of areas needing improvement.

In addition, he said, 40 days are designated every quarter to review what is necessary for youth to achieve permanent placement. "Through these reviews, we've worked together to find solutions to our challenges in achieving permanency for children."

Finally, he said, monthly meetings are held with staff to emphasize the importance of how to handle and supervise cases and focusing on expectations and what is necessary to reach our goals.

"We are still 'righting the ship,' and we have more to accomplish," Pristow said. "Sixteen months ago, the rate of children removed from their home was one of the highest rates in the nation. Today, we're working more closely with law enforcement, county attorneys and the courts to identify other options, as well as local agencies to provide services to children and families in their home. We want to provide services to families before a situation

develops to the point that it involves law enforcement.”

He praised foster parents who accept foster children in their homes for a short time or longer, including adoption, when it’s unsafe for a child to return home. “We continue to have a need for foster parents who are an important part of what we do. A caring home atmosphere is critical to reducing the trauma children experience when they are removed from their home.”

Pristow encouraged persons interested in foster parenting to contact DHHS at 1-800-772-7368.

Every two weeks, a new story about children and families in the child welfare system can be found at a DHHS website titled “Pathways of Hope:” [www.dhhs.ne.gov/pathways](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/pathways).